

The Art of Limited Warfare: Operational Art in the 1970 Cambodian Campaign

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

The Art of Limited Warfare: Operational Art in the 1970 Cambodian Campaign, by MAJ Ian C. Pitkin, U.S. Army, 44 pages.

This monograph analyzes the 1970 Cambodian Campaign and deduces lessons which help military scholars and practitioners understand the current US military doctrine of operational art. By looking at all three levels of war- strategic, tactical, and operational- three important lessons emerge regarding ends, means, and ways linked by operational artists in wars of limited aims. These points are not solely relevant to that campaign of the past, but are also informative regarding the future. In future wars, operational artists could benefit from the lessons discovered to better translate military operations into political results.

Section One outlines the political and strategic context surrounding the campaign, concluding that ends (policy and strategic aims) can change over time, which requires the operational artist to reframe the operational approach. Section Two provides an overview of the battles and engagements within the campaign and finds that the tendency in limited warfare toward restricting means (resources) affects the translation of tactical actions into enduring advantages. Section Three looks at the way (operational design) the campaign implemented to link means with ends and concludes that the tools used to develop operational approaches should differ depending on the type of warfare being waged.

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Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief of US Pacific Command
COG	Center of Gravity
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JGS	Joint General Staff
JP	Joint Publication
MACV	Military Assistance Command- Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
USAF	United States Air Force
VC	Viet Cong

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Introduction

There came a time when the war was won. The fighting wasn't over, but the war was won. This achievement can probably best be dated in late 1970, after the Cambodian incursion in the spring of that year.

-Lewis Sorley, *A Better War*

The Vietnam conflict is often cited by military scholars as a failure in the practice of what current US military doctrine calls operational art. Specifically, it portrayed an instance when military outcomes of tactical actions did not achieve the strategic objectives set forth by policymakers and strategists. However, many policymakers and strategists of the time viewed the results of military operations as conducive to the achievement of their strategic objectives. How then was the understanding of practitioners of the time regarding the contribution of military actions in Vietnam to strategic objectives different from modern military scholars?

During the Vietnam conflict, Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) was responsible for arranging tactical actions across military services in pursuit of strategic objectives as set forth by the Commander-in-Chief of US Pacific Command (CINCPAC), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the Secretary of Defense, and the President of the United States. The 1970 Cambodian campaign is an example in which MACV, through the arrangement of tactical actions in pursuit of strategic objectives, performed what we now understand as operational art. An in-depth historical case study of this campaign helps military scholars and practitioners better understand the US military's doctrine of operational art and the relationship between tactical actions and strategic objectives.

Current joint and Army doctrine is full of complex and seemingly contradictory concepts regarding operational art. For instance, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, describes operational art as “the application of creative imagination by commanders and staffs-supported by their skill, knowledge, and experience-to design strategies, campaigns, and major operations and

organize and employ military forces.”¹ Joint doctrine further states that “operational art governs the deployment of those forces and the arrangement of operations to achieve operational and strategic objectives.”² Conversely, US Army doctrine in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, defines operational art as “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”³

The result of these varying perspectives on operational art represents different interpretations of who conducts operational art and whether operational art is the simple pursuit of strategic objectives or the achievement of them. What is common among these definitions is an interaction between strategy and tactics played out through the practice of operational art. Though each situation in which operational art is practiced is unique in its circumstances, in-depth historical case studies which examine the interaction of strategy and tactics are of great relevance and importance. They provide understanding of the present by questioning the evidence of the past.

To find out what the 1970 Cambodian Campaign teaches regarding operational art, three research topics must be addressed. First, the policy and strategic goals of the campaign must identify the ends toward which the campaign was oriented. Section One outlines the political context surrounding the campaign and shows how policy and strategy “ends” changed over time. Second, the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve strategic goals must be reviewed to describe how the campaign was resourced and conducted to achieve the desired ends. Section Two provides an overview which focuses on the “means” of the campaign—the organization and employment of forces in battle and the outcomes their actions produced.

¹ Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), I-13.

² Ibid., I-14.

³ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 9.

Finally, the campaign’s operational design must be examined as the lens through which to identify relevancy of concepts associated with operational art. Section Three looks at the “way” or operational approach developed and implemented in the campaign to link means with ends.

Definitions for select ordinary terms herein will be used differently in military parlance than in standard writing. Also, abstract terms will be used with specific meanings or with applications to specific contexts. It will be useful for the reader to know several terms to understand this study. Most of these terms are used in accordance with their definition in current joint US military doctrine with the exceptions of “policy” and “military strategy,” which are not defined doctrinal terms. The term “policy” is used to describe a course of action or principle adopted and pursued by a government, ruler, political party, or other political agents. “Strategy” should be interpreted as a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.⁴ “Military strategy,” from which military end state is derived, refers specifically to the military aspects of the national/grand strategy. An “operational approach” should be understood as a description of the broad actions the force must take to transform current conditions into those desired at the end state.⁵ Finally, “tactical actions” should be understood as battles and engagements planned and executed to achieve military objectives assigned to units or task forces.⁶

Critical analysis is applied herein to the Cambodian Campaign within the context of contemporary operational art, revealing insights to modern military scholars and practitioners. Historical events and decisions made by policymakers, strategists, operational artists, and tacticians are examined. Though the elements of operational design from joint doctrine are used

⁴ Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016), 227.

⁵ Ibid., 174.

⁶ Ibid., 234. Derived from “tactical level of war.”

to interpret these events and decisions, doctrine is not used as a checklist or dogma to which actors adhered or not. Arguments for specific or direct linkages to modern military events are not attempted, and winners and losers within the Vietnam conflict are not determined. Rather, the military aspects of the events surrounding the Cambodian incursion are emphasized, primarily from the United States' point of view, within the greater strategic context of Washington, Saigon, and Hanoi.

The 1970 Cambodian Campaign helps military scholars and practitioners understand the current US military doctrine of operational art. By looking at all three levels of war—strategic, tactical, and operational—three important lessons emerge from the campaign regarding ends, means, and ways linked by operational artists in wars of limited aims. First, ends (policy and strategic aims) can change over time, which means the operational artist will likely need to reframe the operational approach. In the case of the Cambodian Campaign, previous discourse with the enemy and amongst the American people and their leaders resulted in a policy and strategy in which US forces did not seek the achievement of military victory in Vietnam; rather, they sought the avoidance of an immediate military defeat. Second, the tendency in limited warfare toward restricting means (resources) can hinder the translation of tactical actions into enduring advantages. Under such restrictions, operations within the Cambodian Campaign provided only limited and temporary advantages that did little to alter the will of the communists or influence them to negotiate for peace. Finally, the tools used to develop operational approaches (ways) should differ depending on the type of war being waged. In the Cambodian Campaign, MACV's operational approach focused efforts against what it perceived as its enemy Center of Gravity (COG), conventional North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces, rather than the achievement of all strategic objectives. In limited wars, operational design is better informed when operational artists focus on those elements which more closely relate to political conditions- termination, military end state, objective, and effects.

By providing an example of the tenuous nature of translating strategic objectives into tactical actions and vice versa, a case study of the Cambodian Campaign shows how the practice of operational art plays out across different the levels of war. It examines not only the notion of victory in war, but also the relationships between the three groups of main concern Clausewitz associates with his paradoxical trinity—the people, the military, and the government.⁷ By analyzing the campaign through the elements of operational design, one learns lessons that are informative for future conflicts. To begin, an examination of the policy and strategic goals of the campaign must identify the ends toward which the campaign was oriented.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

Section One: Policy and Strategic Ends

In wars of limited aim, policies and strategies change over time. The discourse between adversaries through violence on the battlefield along with the discourse between policymakers and populations through international and domestic politics create changes in the environment. Over time, these environmental changes alter the termination criteria (required conditions for ending the conflict) deemed to be achievable, thus forcing an evolution to the policy and strategy.⁸ Unable to provide decisive outcomes that alter the will of the adversary's government, military, and people, military forces operating under a policy and strategy which once sought military victory can find themselves later seeking much more limited objectives.

The story of the US involvement in Vietnam begins with a prolonged and reluctant escalation, with the first formal US military personnel assignments beginning under the Truman administration in 1950.⁹ Feeling compelled to contain further spread of communism in Southeast Asia after seeing a war of communist liberation in Laos, President Kennedy increased the number of US advisers to South Vietnam from nine hundred to more than eleven thousand. Like his predecessor, President Johnson assumed that a non-communist South Vietnam was vital to America's interests, though he too was hesitant to commit his full energy or the nation's full resources to the conflict.¹⁰

Lacking a passion for foreign policy, Johnson's administration would have preferred to focus on domestic reform and his Great Society program. In order to protect his domestic agenda, Johnson felt he could not risk foreign policy inaction, which might embolden his political opponents. Therefore, Johnson's policy aim in Vietnam was to maintain a sovereign South

⁸ G. Steven Lauer, "The Tao of Doctrine: Contesting an Art of Operations," *Joint Force Quarterly* Volume 82 (July 2016): 122.

⁹ Richard W. Stewart, *Deepening Involvement: 1945-1965* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 2012), 10.

¹⁰ George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: US Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 726.

Vietnam in the face of a communist North Vietnam. Using an attack on US ships in international waters as an opportunity to project an image of strength, Johnson achieved a landslide victory over Goldwater in the 1964 election with the help of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a law passed in August 1964 authorizing him to expand the war effort.¹¹ In 1965, facing both political chaos in South Vietnam and NVA attacks in the south, including against US advisory forces in Pleiku, Johnson began to increase retaliatory bombings against North Vietnam. In order to guard the air bases necessary for the expanded air campaign, Johnson sent US Marines into Vietnam in a combat role. A series of engagements between the NVA and South Vietnamese units forced Johnson, under the advice of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and MACV commander Gen. Westmoreland, to commit 175,000 more troops to the rice paddies of South Vietnam.¹²

The military strategy employed by Westmoreland in Vietnam can be understood as one of attrition. Instead of a decisive battle against the NVA, the strategy instead sought to achieve victory through cumulative enemy losses resulting in the loss of will to resist.¹³ This strategy was limited in a number of respects. It rejected the full commitment of US military power out of fear of eroding political support for the domestic agenda. Also, it sought to avoid confrontation with China and the Soviet Union by refusing to allow ground forces to operate across South Vietnam's borders and refusing to bomb targets near the Chinese border.¹⁴ Within these political and strategic boundaries, the resources committed to Vietnam became heavily scrutinized as the results of the strategy showed little progress. In 1967, with almost 500,000 troops in theater, Westmoreland implemented a massive bombing campaign, dubbed Operation Rolling Thunder, coupled with aggressive ground search and destroy missions. North Vietnamese forces, however,

¹¹ Ibid., 729-739.

¹² Ibid., 739.

¹³ John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (University of Kansas Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁴ Herring, 739.

remained elusive, choosing to avoid heavy losses in major combat and taking advantage of sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia.¹⁵

Frustration with the administration's strategy in Vietnam peaked during the 1968 election cycle with conservative hawks demanding that Johnson quickly secure victory while liberals questioned the ultimate legitimacy and justice of the war. Polls began to show a steep decline in the support for the war and Johnson's handling of it.¹⁶ The 1968 NVA Tet Offensive, though failing to achieve a general overthrow of the South Vietnamese government, stunned the American public, who had been led to believe by the Johnson administration that the situation in Vietnam was becoming more stable. Largely as a result of events in Vietnam in 1967-68, Johnson decided to not seek re-election.¹⁷

Unlike Johnson, whose efforts and talents were centered on domestic politics, President Richard Nixon was more adept and interested in international affairs and foreign relations. He entered office convinced that a clear victory in Vietnam was no longer possible. Nixon and his administration understood their policy goal in Vietnam was an exit from the conflict through the establishment of "peace with honor." Henry Kissinger, the former Harvard professor tapped by Nixon to serve as National Security Advisor, agreed that US policy in Vietnam required major changes, both militarily and diplomatically. In December 1968, to gauge their opponents' willingness to engage in compromise, Nixon and Kissinger informed the North Vietnamese that the new president was interested in negotiating an end to the conflict. The response from the North Vietnamese demanded both the unconditional withdrawal of American troops and the replacement of the Nguyen Van Thieu's government in South Vietnam.¹⁸ This response showed

¹⁵ Ibid., 739.

¹⁶ Ibid., 740.

¹⁷ Shaw, 2.

¹⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 676-679.

the new administration how challenging the achievement of a negotiated peace might be, but it also helped them establish limits on their policy expectations. Nixon, in his *Memoirs*, wrote:

I began my presidency with three fundamental premises regarding Vietnam. First, I would have to prepare public opinion for the fact that total military victory was no longer possible. Second, I would have to act on what my conscience, my experience, and my analysis told me was true about the need to keep our commitment. To abandon South Vietnam to the Communists now would cost us inestimably in our search for a stable, structured, and lasting peace. Third, I would have to end the war as quickly as was honorably possible.¹⁹

Before taking office as president, Nixon and his future cabinet officials conducted a review of his options to end the war in Vietnam and laid out three broad strategy approaches. The first, unilateral withdrawal, seemed like the fastest way out of the conflict. However, the actual time for full, organized withdrawal was fifteen months, which posed major risks to the force during the retrograde. This first option was also deemed to carry too much political risk by reversing a national commitment to an American ally. The second option, a combination of military and political pressures on Hanoi, was recommended by Kissinger but rejected by Nixon because he did not believe he could muster the Congressional endorsement required to resource an approach which resembled a continuation of Johnson's policy. That left the third option, a gradual shifting of the responsibility of the war to the South Vietnamese while simultaneously conducting a gradual US withdrawal—the strategy which came to be known as Vietnamization.²⁰

The strategy of Vietnamization sought to keep in manageable balance three major efforts: sustaining domestic political support, giving South Vietnam a chance to survive, and giving Hanoi incentive to negotiate a settlement. The Nixon administration was aware of several risks inherent to such a strategy. This option potentially took the longest time to accomplish, risked public restlessness for faster withdrawal, and might encourage Hanoi and the NVA to prolong the conflict. Despite these risks, the strategy of Vietnamization was seen by the Nixon administration

¹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1978), 349.

²⁰ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 679-681.

as the least negative of three relatively unattractive options. It gave the American and South Vietnamese people a timeline for withdrawal, it sought to strengthen a US ally in South Vietnam, and it reduced the risk to US forces inherent in withdrawal from the conflict.²¹

General Creighton Abrams, Jr., who took over command of MACV from Westmoreland in July 1968, advised the Nixon administration on the implementation of Vietnamization. Concerning the prospect of troop drawdowns, he cautioned that “Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) simply are not capable of attaining the level of self-sufficiency and overwhelming force superiority that would be required to counter combined Viet Cong (VC) insurgency and North Vietnamese Army main force offensives.”²² Because of this apparent lack of RVNAF capability, Abrams advised the administration that US troop withdrawals must be met with similar NVA withdrawals, a recommendation which the administration later found itself unwilling to implement. Meeting with Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird on 5 March 1969 in Saigon, Abrams reiterated these warnings, to which Laird responded by instructing him to speed up the process of turning over the war effort to RVNAF.²³

To implement Vietnamization, Nixon and Laird issued a formal change of mission to Abrams and MACV, which took effect on 15 August 1969. The previous mission had been to defeat enemy forces and induce enemy withdrawal from South Vietnam. The new mission included three main tasks: providing maximum assistance to strengthen the armed forces of South Vietnam, increasing support to the pacification effort, and reducing the flow of supplies to the enemy down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.²⁴ The last of these was included because the NVA logistical system was of strategic importance in the Vietnam conflict. An ancient network of footpaths and

²¹ Ibid., 682-683.

²² James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 12.

²³ Ibid., 12-14.

²⁴ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1979), 276.

roads through rugged, densely-vegetated terrain in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia provided a complex and resilient system for NVA logistics. The entire trail system, from main roads to regularly-used footpaths, was estimated by North Vietnamese General Van Tien Dung to be more than 12,500 miles long.²⁵

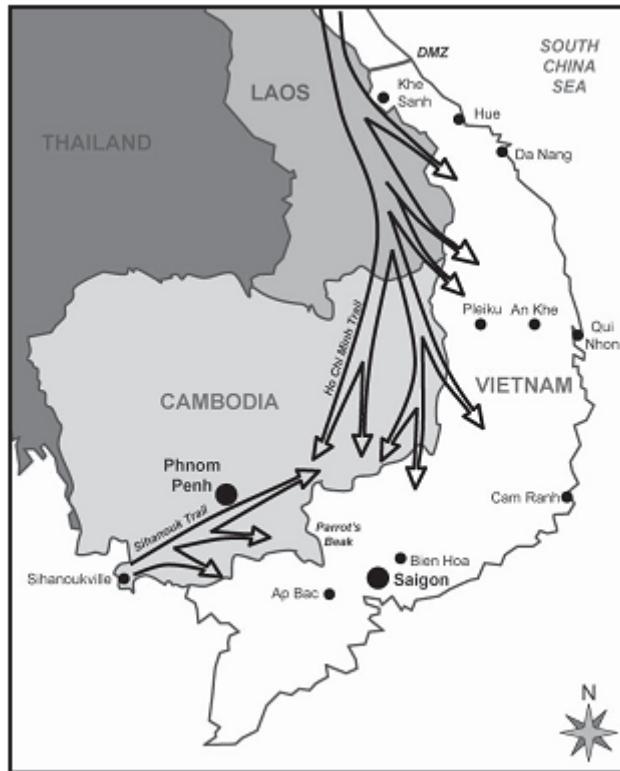


Figure 1. North Vietnamese logistics and infiltration routes. Thomas A. Bruscino, Jr., *Out of Bounds: Transnational Sanctuary in Irregular Warfare*, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 17 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 17.

Logistical support was provided to the NVA and VC operating in South Vietnam through two distinct ground supply routes: the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the Sihanoukville Port Route. In conjunction with these infiltration routes was a system of base areas where supplies were received, stored, and distributed to combat units operating in South Vietnam. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, originating in Vinh, North Vietnam, ran along the Laotian and Cambodian borders south to major passes and points of access into South Vietnam and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). To

²⁵ Richard L. Stevens, *The Trail: A History of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Role of Nature in the War in Viet Nam* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc.), xi.

protect the Trail from US aerial bombing, North Vietnam installed air defense weapons; camouflaged vehicles, weapons, and bases; and distributed lighter-weight supplies among individual personnel who manually carried loads from one base to another.²⁶

The second ground logistic route, originating in the Cambodian port city of Sihanoukville, ran across lower Cambodia toward base areas along the Cambodia-South Vietnam border. In contrast to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Sihanoukville Port Route was considered by the North Vietnamese to be a much more secure line of communication because it lay entirely in Cambodia. Until March 1969, Cambodia officially maintained a neutral status, meaning that the Sihanoukville trail was not subject to United States Air Force (USAF) bombings. Despite this declared neutrality, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the ruling prince of Cambodia, was anti-American and passively supported North Vietnamese activity within his country.²⁷

Abrams recognized the problem US forces faced in withdrawing from South Vietnam under pressure from NVA and VC forces. Understanding the strategic importance of the cross-border infiltration routes and base areas in providing these adversary forces with adequate supplies, he refocused MACV's operational approach on attacking enemy logistics. In the Free World Forces 1970 Combined Campaign Plan, issued 31 October 1969, MACV's military objectives included operations targeting enemy supply lines both in Vietnam and in "authorized contiguous areas."²⁸

Though Cambodian territory was off-limits to US and South Vietnamese ground forces, Abrams advised Nixon to authorize USAF bombings of North Vietnamese base areas within Cambodia that lay along its border with Vietnam. Nixon approved Operation Menu in 1969,

²⁶ Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1979), 18-20.

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Shaw, 18.

initiating the bombing of NVA base areas within Cambodia. As Operation Menu progressed through early 1970, aerial and secret ground reconnaissance reports indicated negligible overall effects on the NVA logistical system, with the exception of an increased dispersion of caches. The NVA were able to maintain adequate supply levels despite Menu bombings. Both the Nixon administration and military leaders knew that to withdraw safely from South Vietnam, they needed to prevent a major NVA attack in South Vietnam; however, under the sanctuary provided by Cambodian neutrality, MACV was precluded from destroying enemy logistical capabilities with ground forces.²⁹

Though it largely failed to directly disrupt adversary logistics, Operation Menu did have strategic effects on the relationship between North Vietnam and Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk, in May 1969, imposed an embargo on North Vietnam, effectively seizing NVA supplies and preventing further use of the Sihanoukville port. He then used the release of the seized supplies to secure an agreement with North Vietnam to cease training and providing support to the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian revolutionary communist movement.³⁰ This agreement was quickly broken after Sihanouk restored diplomatic relations with the US a month after the Menu bombings commenced. Dismayed by the prospect of losing Cambodia to the influence of the United States, Hanoi began assisting the Khmer Rouge in a civil war within Cambodia. In January 1970, while Sihanouk was out of the country on vacation in France, the violence of the civil war began to crescendo.

Prime Minister Lon Nol, previously a general in the Cambodian Army, was a nationalist who never accepted North Vietnam's operations in sovereign Cambodian territory. As a result of the civil chaos under Sihanouk and NVA violations of Cambodian sovereignty, Nol staged a bloodless coup on 18 March 1970 and demanded that North Vietnam remove all its forces from

²⁹ Ibid., 13-24.

³⁰ Ibid., 24.

Cambodia within seventy-two hours.³¹ Not willing to cede its logistical system, North Vietnam, in support of Khmer Rouge, attacked Cambodian army forces to isolate and ultimately overthrow the Nol government. Alarmed by North Vietnamese operations against the Cambodian army and the Nol government, President Nixon on 25 March requested that military options be developed for ARVN or partner ARVN/US operations into the NVA sanctuaries.³²

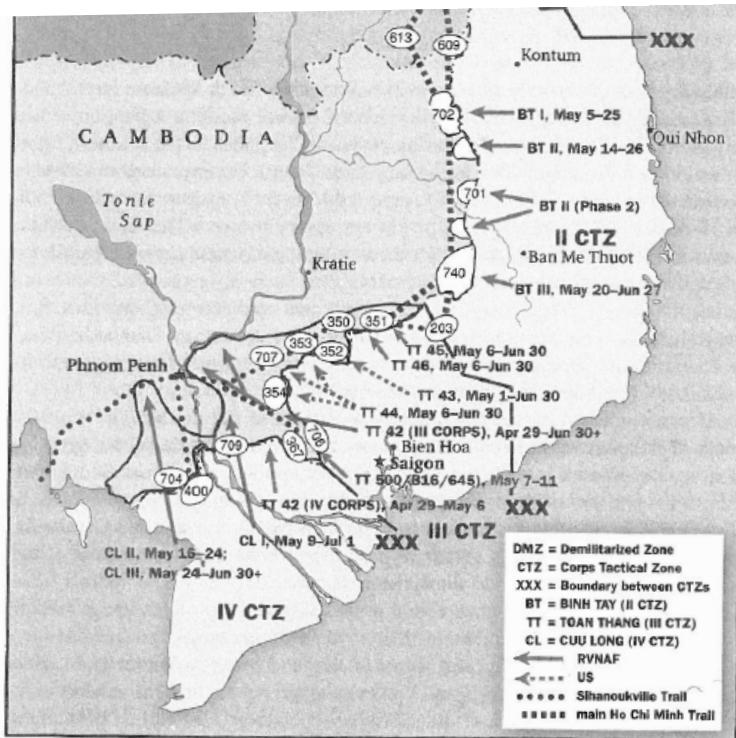


Figure 2. Base areas and major operations. John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 6.

MACV, after receiving the JCS order to develop planning options, submitted two distinct concepts on 30 March. The first option was an attack using elements of the US 1st Cavalry Division and the ARVN Airborne Division into Base Areas 352/353, an area dubbed the "Fish Hook," where large supply storage and headquarters areas were located. This option, which required more US forces to ensure its success, was to begin with B-52 bombings followed with ground attacks by two regiments (each regiment had two to four maneuver battalions along with a

³¹ Ibid., 24-25.

³² Willbanks, 72.

number of support battalions). MACV assessed that the first option would span three to four weeks. Because the major enemy headquarters was located in the “Fish Hook,” this option was assessed to result in fewer non-combatant casualties, but more US/RVNAF casualties.³³

The second option provided for simultaneous attacks against Base Area 704, a major storage area and transshipment point, and Base Area 367/706, an extensive logistics base and sub-regional headquarters area also known as the “Parrot’s Beak”. Attacks against Base Area 704 would be accomplished by an ARVN armored brigade with US riverine support, and attacks on Base Area 367/706 would be conducted by three brigades of US/ARVN forces in an air mobile and ground operation. The operations would last about fourteen days and were assessed to result in higher non-combatant, but fewer friendly force casualties compared to the first option. MACV’s analysis of these options concluded that if successful, both would have a highly favorable effect on RVNAF morale and confidence, which would enhance Vietnamization and result in destruction of enemy facilities. MACV also assessed that if the communists didn’t anticipate the encounters, the proposed operations would significantly reduce the threat to III and IV Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ), thus creating long-term impacts which outweighed inherent risks.³⁴

In early April, the Nixon administration and Abrams continued to assess the political and military environment and their available options as the situation in Cambodia developed. As NVA and Khmer forces continued their advance toward the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, Lon Nol, on 14 April, requested military assistance. Operation Toan Thang 41 (Total Victory 41), a predominantly RVNAF operation with support of US ground forces from the 25th Infantry

³³ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Vol. VI, *Vietnam January 1969- July 1970*, ed. Edward C. Keefer and Carolyn Yee (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 753-754. Memorandum from the Senior Military Assistant (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, DC, April 3, 1970.

³⁴ Ibid., 753-754. Memorandum from the Senior Military Assistant (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, DC, April 3, 1970.

Division and the USAF, took place between 14 and 17 April. This operation surprised the NVA in base camps in the vicinity of Base Area 706 and resulted in a promising tactical success.³⁵

Buoyed by the success of Toan Thang 41, on 19 April, CINCPAC, Admiral John S. McCain Jr., advised Nixon that “to withdraw another 150,000 troops from South Vietnam this year, you must protect Saigon’s western flank by an invasion of the Cambodian sanctuaries.”³⁶ Nixon now recognized that if an invasion did not occur, Cambodia would fall to the Communists, jeopardizing the entire Vietnamization strategy and the policy goal of peace with honor. On 30 April, Nixon outlined the strategic objectives of the Cambodian Campaign in a televised address to the nation: assure the continued withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam; reduce risk to South Vietnamese and Cambodian regimes, forces, and people; and enhance the US position in negotiating peace with Hanoi.³⁷

From Johnson to Nixon, policies and strategies regarding Vietnam changed over time. Military interactions on the battlefield between adversary forces and political discourse in the domestic and international realms altered the conditions acceptable to terminate conflict. US forces in 1970, instead of seeking military victory, found themselves seeking much more limited aims—the avoidance of immediate military defeat. Next, the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose must be reviewed to show how the campaign was resourced and conducted to achieve the desired ends.

³⁵ Tho, 44-48.

³⁶ Willbanks, 72.

³⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “30 APR 1970 Cambodian Incursion Address,” accessed 31 January 2017, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/richardnixoncambodia.html.

Section Two: Tactical Means

In wars of limited aims, where policy and strategic objectives may not seek military victory, but rather the avoidance of defeat, operational artists (those who arrange tactical actions in accordance with a given military strategy in pursuit of policy aims) likely have fewer resources and are often more restricted in their use. This happens because policymakers, in order to mitigate political risk inherent in the execution of their policy, place restrictions on operational artists.³⁸ As a result, operational artists engaged in limited warfare are more challenged in organizing forces and arranging tactical actions which ensure a continued advantage.

To achieve Nixon's policy goals of a settlement with Hanoi, while avoiding the appearance of either decisive allied military defeat or US abandonment of South Vietnam, Abrams needed to bring the combat situation under control, shift responsibility of the war to RVNAF, and withdraw US troops from the theater. The combined US/Republic of Vietnam incursion into Cambodia was an attempt to protect the withdrawal of US forces through the disruption of enemy base areas. By destroying materials, neutralizing units, disrupting command and control, and denying base areas, MACV sought to focus its operations on critical capabilities of the NVA within border sanctuaries. However, the campaign was restricted in both time (duration) and space (distance).

Considering the political risk of the campaign, Nixon only permitted US forces to operate across the border for eight weeks and only at a depth of thirty kilometers. By mid-April 1970, Abrams had begun discussing the probable future cross-border operations to attack NVA base areas in Cambodia with his counterpart, General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the RVNAF Joint General Staff (JGS). Later that month, President Thieu authorized the RVNAF to conduct operations along the Vietnam/Cambodian border to a depth extending between forty and sixty

³⁸ Lauer, 121.

kilometers into Cambodian territory.³⁹ Regarding US forces, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer informed Abrams on 01 May of Nixon's intent to "employ maximum feasible military strength against the remaining base areas in Cambodia which you consider important to enemy operations and which can be attacked with available US and RVNAF forces...initially within thirty kilometers of the border."⁴⁰ Such restrictions are driving factors in the analysis of operational reach and culmination in the campaign.

The campaign was comprised of a series of combined US/RVNAF operations, which were divided into three groupings based off the Corps and Field Forces from which the orders originated. Toan Thang (Total Victory) was conducted mostly by the ARVN III Corps and US Field Force II. Cuu Long (Mekong) was conducted by the ARVN IV Corps with elements of the US Delta Military Assistance Command. Finally, Binh Tay (Tame the West) was conducted by the ARVN II Corps with US Field Force I.⁴¹

The two most important NVA bases in Cambodia rested in areas nicknamed Parrot's Beak and Fish Hook. The Parrot's Beak, protruding sharply into South Vietnam, provided the enemy with sanctuary extremely close to Saigon. It was from the Parrot's Beak that the NVA 9th Division had penetrated toward Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive. The Fish Hook area was assessed by MACV to contain not only enemy bases and supply depots, but also the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the NVA headquarters from which the war in South Vietnam was directed.⁴² To prevent the enemy from reinforcing the Fish Hook from the Parrot's

³⁹ Tho, 36.

⁴⁰ Foreign Relations of the United States, 917-918. Memorandum of Conversation, WSAG Principals Meeting, Washington, DC, April 24, 1970.

⁴¹ Tho, 51.

⁴² Ibid., 39-40.

Beak, a supporting RVNAF attack into the Parrot's Beak would begin a day before the main US/RVNAF attack into the Fish Hook.⁴³

On the morning of 29 April, the ARVN III Corps initiated Phase I of Operation Toan Thang 42, attacking into the Parrot's Beak through Base Area 706. All three of III Corps' task forces made heavy contact with the enemy, but were able to overwhelm pockets of heavy enemy resistance by integrating artillery and close air support. On 02 May, the ARVN IV Corps joined the operation for Phase II, attacking north into the Parrot's Beak and Base Area 367. By 03 May, forces from III and IV Corps had linked-up and began systematic searches and clearances of enemy infrastructure and supply caches. Together, III and IV Corps destroyed enemy bases and stores south of Route 1 in the Parrot's Beak through 05 May. With the withdrawal of IV Corps from the Parrot's Beak on 06 May, III Corps initiated Phase III of Operation Toan Thang 42. From 07 through 11 May, III Corps turned its task forces north and attacked across the Kompong Spean River, continuing to defeat enemy resistance and seize enemy installations and stores along the way. On 11 May, III Corps received a directive from the office of Thieu that Vietnamese refugees in Cambodia, mistreated by the Cambodian authorities, needed to be repatriated as soon as possible. In response, III Corps planned a subsequent Phase IV of Operation Toan Thang 42 to clear Route 1 for refugee evacuation, an event which informs analysis of COG because it suggests that the RVNAF saw their enemy COG as dealing with the population, which was different from the US perception of its enemy COG. From 13 through 22 May, all three task forces from III Corps advanced west, often in heavy contact with the NVA. By 22 May, Route 1 was secured to within sixty kilometers of Phnom Penh. Beginning 12 May, however, a Cambodian military outpost at Kompong Cham was isolated and harassed by NVA. To relieve the siege at Kompong Cham, III Corps initiated Phase V of Toan Thang 42 on 21 June. By 27 June, after heavy engagements with elements of the NVA 9th Division, the area around Kampong Cham was

⁴³ Willbanks, 75-77.

cleared of enemy forces.⁴⁴ During the entire operation, III and IV Corps killed close to 3,000 enemy combatants and captured over 760 enemy prisoners along with 3,000 individual and 600 crew-served weapons. They also seized over 400 tons of assorted ammunition and nearly 1,100 tons of rice.⁴⁵ Toan Thang 42 provided an important, temporary blow to the nearest and most direct communist threat to Saigon and US forces in South Vietnam.

Unlike Toan Thang 42, which was predominantly a RVNAF operation supported by a small number of US forces, the principle units for Toan Thang 43 included elements of the 1st Cavalry Division, 25th Infantry Division, and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment under the US II Field Force. This operation, initiated on 01 May, was intended to destroy enemy bases in the Fish Hook area. MACV believed the area included the COSVN headquarters, making it a major decisive point in the design of the campaign. The allied US/RVNAF concept for the operation included a heliborne assault into three landing zones north of the templated headquarters to block an enemy retreat, combined with a ground attack to surround the objective from the south, east, and west. As these forces converged on the objective, however, they met only limited and sporadic enemy resistance, which indicated that the templated bases and COSVN headquarters had been abandoned.

Despite the lack of large enemy forces, the operation uncovered an enormous enemy installation dubbed “The City,” which spanned over three square kilometers, along with hundreds of caches of supplies.⁴⁶ Arguably one of the most important sanctuaries in Cambodia, “The City” and subsequent bases discovered in Toan Thang 43 netted more than 4,500 individual weapons and 700 crew-served weapons, in excess of 300 tons of ammunition, and over 2,500 tons of

⁴⁴ Tho, 51-69.

⁴⁵ Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Report, *The Cambodian Campaign, 29 April -30 June 1970* (Honolulu, HI: HQ Pacific Air Forces, Tactical Evaluation Directorate, 1970), 13.

⁴⁶ Tho, 70-78.

rice.⁴⁷ Elements of the US II Field Force and its partnered ARVN III Corps continued to search and find enemy facilities and stores throughout the Fish Hook through the end of June, uncovering additional ammunition caches, mess halls, training areas, livestock farms, hospitals, maintenance facilities, and signal and communications facilities.⁴⁸ The assault on this base area contributed to the disruption of the communists' ability to threaten a conventional attack into South Vietnam until the logistical stockpiles could be re-established.

On 02 May, the day after Toan Thang 43 was launched against the Fish Hook, MACV and JGS ordered the RVNAF II Corps and US Field Force I to attack enemy base areas west of the Cambodian border along Military Region 2. The US 4th Infantry Division and its counterpart, the ARVN 22nd Division, began planning attacks against a series of objectives, the first being the Base Area 702. This area, just inside Cambodia near the tri-border region with Vietnam and Laos, was assessed by MACV to contain communications way stations and provided an area for rest and recuperation of enemy forces. The attack of Base Area 702 became Operation Binh Tay I.⁴⁹

On the morning of 05 May, the first elements of 1st Brigade, US 4th Infantry Division initiated a heliborne assault into the objective area but were unable to land due to enemy heavy machine gun fire on the landing zones. Enemy fires continued to impede landings throughout 06 May, damaging multiple aircraft. Only on 07 May had 4th Infantry Division completed the landing of its 1st and 2nd Brigades, after which ground contact became light and scattered.⁵⁰ This was later explained by the discovery of documents which showed the enemy had anticipated the attack, preparing a rearguard defense while withdrawing supplies and avoiding decisive combat. Elements of the ARVN 40th Regiment, 22nd Division along with the ARVN 2nd Ranger Group

⁴⁷ CHECO Report, 11.

⁴⁸ Tho, 76-78.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 90-93.

⁵⁰ CHECO Report, 9-10.

assisted in the clearance of Base Area 702 until 25 May.⁵¹ During this period, US and ARVN forces uncovered a rice cache exceeding 500 tons, a hospital with X-Ray equipment, and training and food production areas, attesting to the importance of Base Area 702 to the enemy's logistics system.⁵² This reduction in food supply was a severe loss to the communists because regardless of the equipment they possessed, the proficiency and lifespan of the VC/NVA soldier was often more dependent on the food in his stomach. Food supply a constant concern for the communists.⁵³

On 06 May, Abrams launched three additional operations—Operations Toan Thang 44, 45, and 46. Toan Thang 44 consisted of three missions: attack Base Area 354, destroy Base Area 707, and plan an attack on the COSVN.⁵⁴ MACV assessed Base Area 354 as a training center, infiltration point, and sanctuary believed to also contain the headquarters for the NVA 9th Division's 95C Regiment. On the morning of 06 May, the 1st Brigade, US 25th Infantry Division launched a heliborne element to secure the west side of the Ben Go River while also maneuvering a ground assault force to the river to establish a bridgehead. The next day, after crossing the river, US forces were engaged on the objective area, killing over 150 enemy and uncovering a rice cache of over thirty tons. 1st Brigade continued to search Base Area 354 for another seven days and discovered another sizeable storage area before terminating the operation on 14 May to join 2nd Brigade's attack on the COSVN.⁵⁵

On 08 May, US forces spotted elements of the COSVN and 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division was given the dual mission of attacking Base Area 707 and the COSVN. Expecting stiff

⁵¹ Tho, 94-94.

⁵² CHECO Report, 10.

⁵³ Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 112.

⁵⁴ Shaw, 107.

⁵⁵ Tho, 78-79.

enemy resistance on the COSVN objective, 2nd Brigade attacked Base Area 707 first while waiting to marshal forces and bombing the COSVN objective area. The attack on Base Area 707 began on 09 May and lasted until 14 May, seizing several caches, including over 200 tons of rice. Meanwhile, on the night of 08 May, B-52s bombed the COSVN objective, which triggered an emergency NVA evacuation. By the time 2nd Brigade had its units in place to encircle the objective on 11 May, the bulk of the headquarters had escaped. 1st and 2nd Brigades continued to clear Base Area 353 from 15 May until the end of the campaign in late June, amassing a haul of hundreds of tons of NVA supplies.⁵⁶

The second of three operations launched on 06 May was Toan Thang 45, an attack against Base Area 351. This complex was assessed by MACV as an enemy munitions depot and staging area for infiltration into Phuoc Long Province. The US II Field Force estimated enemy forces in Base Area 351 to be approximately 2,500 men.⁵⁷ The 2nd Brigade, US 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) initiated the operation with a heliborne assault into the objective area, making contact with only scattered enemy resistance. On the second day, 2nd Brigade uncovered a single enemy weapons and ammunition cache in excess of 250 tons, nicknaming the area “Rock Island East.”⁵⁸ The confiscation and destruction of such a vast quantity of communist arms and ammunition contributed substantially to the inability of NVA forces to launch a large-scale conventional attack into South Vietnam from Cambodia for two years.

Throughout May, with enemy contact increasing, the US 1st Cavalry Division steadily brought in more of its battalions to expand its searches in Base Area 351. Using Cambodian troops as guides, they continued to locate enemy caches and facilities. By 05 June, with its final battalion brought into the area, the 1st Cavalry Division was operating at full strength. During the

⁵⁶ Shaw, 117-123.

⁵⁷ Foreign Relations of the United States, 938. Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, DC, May 5, 1970.

⁵⁸ Tho, 79-81.

month of June, the division discovered an enemy surgical hospital, vehicle maintenance facility, and an underground signal station of the COSVN headquarters. Enemy forces conducted regular attacks against US forces throughout the operation and by the end of June, when the final battalion of the US 1st Cavalry Division withdrew from Base Area 351, USAF bombers were used to prevent enemy pursuit.⁵⁹

The third operation initiated on 06 May, Toan Thang 46, targeted Base Area 350. Located across the border from ARVN III Corps tactical zone, Base Area 350 was assessed by MACV as a logistics storage area and sanctuary for 1,500 enemy troops from elements of the NVA 7th Division.⁶⁰ Unlike Operations Toan Thang 44 and 45, Toan Thang 46 was predominantly an ARVN mission with US aerial support. On 06 May, two battalions of the ARVN 9th Regiment, 5th Infantry Division conducted a heliborne assault into the objective area, initially meeting scattered enemy contact. As these battalions discovered several enemy food, ammunition, and weapons caches during the first few days in the objective area, enemy contact began to escalate.⁶¹

On 11 May, the ARVN 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron reinforced the two infantry battalions. This combined ARVN force, over 3,000 strong, repulsed the enemy in a heavy engagement on 21 May, after which they discovered a large enemy surgical hospital and additional supply caches. Through mid-June, small ARVN security patrols were continually engaged by enemy elements, forcing patrolling at company-sized levels. As the campaign drew to a close at the end of June, the ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment and 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron

⁵⁹ Ibid., 79-81.

⁶⁰ Foreign Relations of the United States, 937. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, DC, May 5, 1970.

⁶¹ Tho, 81-88.

began their retrograde from Cambodia back to the III Corps tactical zone. They continued to make enemy contact and find more enemy caches as they withdrew.⁶²

Initial US and ARVN operations during the campaign forced the NVA and Khmer Rouge to shift their military focus in Cambodia to the west. To isolate the capital, they interdicted and attacked civilian and military traffic along Routes 1, 2, 3, and the Mekong River, disrupting the main roads and waterways from the provinces into Phnom Penh. At the same time, Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees continued to move toward the capital. To deal with this crisis, the Cambodian government requested RVNAF assistance in opening the roads and the river.⁶³ This resulted in the series of operations named Cuu Long I, II, and III, conducted mainly by RVNAF, but assisted by a US riverine force. The objectives of these operations were to clear the Mekong River and main routes, along with assisting in the repatriation of Vietnamese refugees.⁶⁴ On 09 May, a ground, aerial, and riverine assault began up the Mekong River toward Phnom Penh. The RVNAF 1st Marine Brigade, supported by US aviation, executed a heliborne assault to seize a major NVA logistical transit site at Neak Luong, where Route 1 crossed the river. By 11 May, ground and riverine forces had linked-up with the Marines at Neak Luong and RVNAF elements continued along the Mekong, reaching the capital by late morning. By 14 May, in conjunction with ARVN III Corp's Operation Toan Thang 42, the Mekong River and Route 1 were cleared for Vietnamese refugees to return to South Vietnam. To exploit the success of Cuu Long I, RVNAF units initiated two additional operations. The first, Cuu Long II, lasted from 16-24 May with the objective of clearing Routes 2 and 3 in South Cambodia. The final operation, Cuu Long III, ran from 25 May to 30 June, with the mission of assisting local governments in Southern Cambodia to stabilize their provinces. During these latter operations, RVNAF, while contributing

⁶² Ibid., 81-88.

⁶³ Ibid., 83-85.

⁶⁴ Foreign Relations of the United States, 938. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, DC, May 5, 1970.

to the evacuation of over 70,000 Vietnamese refugees from Cambodia, continued to make small-scale engagements with NVA and Khmer Rouge and uncovered additional enemy supply caches.⁶⁵

On 14 May MACV and RVNAF initiated another operation, Binh Tay II, against Base Area 701. MACV assessed Base Area 701, with an estimated strength close to 2,500 enemy, to be a major NVA logistical node and troop staging area for attacks into the ARVN II CTZ.⁶⁶ With USAF tactical air and US Army aviation support, two regiments of the ARVN 22nd Infantry Division conducted a heliborne assault while the ARVN 3rd Armored Cavalry Squadron conducted a ground assault onto the objective. Little enemy contact was made during the operation, indicating that the major NVA units templated on the objective had likely moved further west into Cambodia.⁶⁷ The ARVN 22nd Infantry Division discovered several sizeable caches, including more than 600 weapons, twenty-seven tons of ammunition, and eighty-nine tons of rice, before concluding the operation on 27 May.⁶⁸

Operation Binh Tay III, conducted by the ARVN 23rd Infantry Division, was an attack on Base Area 740, which MACV assessed as an active transportation hub containing several battalion-sized NVA units. Supported by US Army aviation and air cavalry support, on 20 May one ARVN brigade-sized task force conducted a heliborne assault into the northern portion of the objective while a second brigade-sized task force executed a ground assault to the south of the objective. During the first days of the operation, enemy contact was minimal and scattered, and

⁶⁵ Tho, 88-90.

⁶⁶ Foreign Relations of the United States, 939. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, DC, May 5, 1970.

⁶⁷ Tho, 95-97.

⁶⁸ CHECO Report, 13.

the ARVN 23rd Division assessed NVA main force units had withdrawn further west into Cambodia before the operation commenced.⁶⁹

The final major operation of the Cambodian incursion was Binh Tay IV. The Cambodian government, unable to relieve two of its troop garrisons in the vicinity of Labang Siek, requested South Vietnamese and US military assistance to evacuate those bases. MACV and JGS assigned this mission to the ARVN 22nd Infantry Division, supported by the US II Field Force. Binh Tay IV was initiated on 23 June as the ARVN 22nd Infantry Division, supported by US Army aviation, airlifted its first infantry units to secure Labang Siek while engineer units cleared the main ground route from the Vietnam border toward the bases. From 25 to 27 June, over 7,500 Cambodian troops, along with dependents and other refugees, were evacuated by ground and air to South Vietnam, where the military forces awaited return to Phnom Penh.⁷⁰

US forces completed their operations in Cambodia on 30 June 1970. Withdrawing back across the border into South Vietnam, they and their RVNAF partner forces had achieved considerable military gains in terms of enemy personnel and material losses throughout the two-month period. After the US withdrawal, in loose coordination with Cambodian forces, the RVNAF struggled to continue its operations in Cambodia to prevent the enemy from returning and to interdict cross-border infiltration into South Vietnam.

The political environment in the United States required Nixon to place operational restrictions on MACV during the campaign. US forces were only able to reach thirty kilometers inside Cambodia, and many NVA units were able to displace beyond this distance and avoid decisive defeat. Also, the duration of the US force employment in support of the campaign was limited to two months. Even though the campaign saw great tactical success, these restrictions did not allow MACV and RVNAF to consolidate the gains they had made or translate them into long-

⁶⁹ Tho, 97-100.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 100-105.

term advantages. RVNAF and Cambodian forces attempted to continue to deny communists sanctuary along the border, but the lack of continued US commitment across the border decreased the potential for keeping them out. This contributed little to the goal of incentivizing Hanoi to negotiate peace. Having analyzed the strategic context and objectives of the campaign, along with the major tactical actions conducted, the campaign's operational design must be examined as the lens through which to identify relevancy of concepts associated with operational art.

Section Three: Operational Ways

The tools used by operational artists to develop operational approaches (actions the force must take to transform current conditions into those desired at end state) and campaigns (series of related major operations to achieve strategic objectives within a given time and space) should differ depending on the type of war being waged.⁷¹ Total wars, often undertaken by regimes which face an existential threat, result in military strategies which seek decisive battle or the annihilation of enemy forces. For the operational artist in total war, opposing military forces are likely identified as the enemy COGs, which in turn become the focus of campaigns and major operations. In the limited warfare undertaken by regimes facing less than existential threats, however, operational artists must focus operational design on those elements which more closely relate to political conditions: termination, military end state, objective, and effects.

For an operational artist to effectively design a campaign plan, the required conditions for the termination of the conflict need to be defined. With those termination criteria in mind, operational planners can better assess the advantages that campaigns create over time and how best to preserve those advantages. Joint doctrine states that to plan effectively, joint force commanders “must know how the President and Secretary of Defense intend to terminate the joint operation and ensure that its outcomes endure.”⁷²

The Nixon administration’s policy of “peace with honor” provided Abrams with broad, unspecific conditions for termination of the conflict. “Peace,” by 1970, implied a negotiated settlement with Hanoi which, at least temporarily, maintained South Vietnamese sovereignty. “With honor” meant that the withdrawal from conflict would not be seen by the American populace or the international community as a military defeat or abandonment of an American

⁷¹ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-02, *Operational Terms and Military Symbols* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 1-8, 1-42.

⁷² Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), III-18.

ally. As an operational artist for the Cambodian Campaign, Abrams' task was to create and preserve US advantages with respect to those termination criteria. The disruption of enemy logistics and seizure of large quantities of enemy supplies during the 1970 Cambodian Campaign contributed to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. The incursion delayed a major NVA offensive, which later materialized and was defeated in the spring offensive of 1972. In this respect, the campaign created an advantage, but a temporary one that did not ensure an enduring outcome. The communists were eventually able to re-establish their logistics and infiltration routes through Cambodia, using them for their final offensive in 1975.⁷³

For operational artists to properly nest operations and campaigns with policy objectives and termination criteria defined by the national leadership, they must envision future military conditions which result in those objectives and criteria. This is accomplished by developing the military end state on which to focus their operational efforts. Joint doctrine describes military end state as "the set of required conditions that defines achievement of all military objectives. It normally represents a point in time and/or circumstances beyond which the President does not require the military instrument of national power as the primary means to achieve remaining national objectives."⁷⁴ The military end state during the Cambodian Campaign can be identified by examining Vietnamization.

To negotiate a strategy for Vietnam nested with the policy of "peace with honor," Abrams and US policymakers settled on Vietnamization. Vietnamization was the name given to both the national strategy for Nixon in Vietnam and also the military strategy for US forces in the conflict. The national strategy included all instruments of national power, and its ends were threefold: to sustain domestic political support, to provide a chance for South Vietnamese

⁷³ Thomas A. Bruscino, Jr., *Out of Bounds: Transnational Sanctuary in Irregular Warfare*, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 17 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 37.

⁷⁴ JP 5-0, III-19.

survival, and to incentivize Hanoi to negotiate a settlement.⁷⁵ As a military strategy nested within the national strategy, Vietnamization described the US military end state in Vietnam through the conditions of: the combat situation brought under control, responsibility for the war shifted to the South Vietnamese, and US troops withdrawn.⁷⁶ The tactical actions arranged in the Cambodian Campaign contributed directly and substantially to the first and third of these military conditions. The campaign temporarily disrupted the communists' offensive capabilities and created the minimum requirements for US troop withdrawals to continue without disgrace. However, such a large and leading role for US forces within the campaign did not provide the RVNAF the opportunity to lead independent, large-scale combat operations, which hindered the overall shift of combat responsibility. Furthermore, the military end state conditions did not translate well to the establishment of end state conditions of the national strategy. The widening of the conflict into Cambodia inflamed popular dissent for US involvement. Furthermore, continued US troop withdrawals without consolidating the tactical gains of the campaign neither convinced Hanoi to settle for peace in the near-term nor considered if the RVNAF had truly shown the ability to ensure South Vietnam sovereignty unsupported by US forces.

To attain the military end state, operational artists develop objectives, which constitute the aim of campaigns or operations. *Joint Operational Planning* describes objectives as “what must be achieved to reach the end state.”⁷⁷ Objectives are a fundamental element of operational design. By tying the execution of tactical tasks to the military end state, they help bridge the tactical and strategic levels of war. In the Cambodian Campaign, tactical actions were arranged to reduce the risk of failure to both the strategy of Vietnamization and the policy objective of “peace with honor.” To salvage the policy by reaching the military end state, the objective of the

⁷⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 682-683.

⁷⁶ Willbanks, 50.

⁷⁷ JP 5-0, III-20.

campaign was to protect US forces in South Vietnam through the disruption of enemy base areas along the Cambodian border.⁷⁸ It was hoped that disruption of these areas might encourage Hanoi toward a peace settlement. More importantly for the United States, though, was that by achieving this objective, at least temporarily, MACV secured a crucial component necessary to “peace with honor”—time. It allowed US forces to withdraw from Vietnam without a large-scale NVA attack and contributed to the “decent interval” of time between American extrication and eventual collapse of South Vietnam, maintaining a greater degree of prestige as a world power.⁷⁹

Operational artists, through the arrangement of tactical actions, attempt to generate favorable outcomes called effects. Joint doctrine explains effects as an element of operational design, stating “Effects describe the conditions related to the objectives. Desired effects describe conditions needed to achieve objectives. Undesired effects describe conditions that will impede achievement of objectives.”⁸⁰ The concept of effects is meant to help operational artists identify the tasks which must be accomplished to achieve an objective through the development of an understanding of the actors and relationships within the system inherent in an operational environment.

The campaign’s objective was the disruption of enemy base areas along the border. The conditions related to this objective were enemy materials confiscated or destroyed, communist units operating in the areas neutralized, enemy command and control disrupted, and base areas denied. These necessary conditions were achieved with direct effects on Hanoi. During the two-month campaign, the enemy lost over 20,000 individual and 2,500 crew-served weapons, approximately 7,000 tons of rice, almost 2,000 tons of ammunition, twenty-nine tons of

⁷⁸ Foreign Relations of the United States, 889. National Security Council Decision Memorandum 57, Washington, DC, April 26, 1970.

⁷⁹ Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 190-195.

⁸⁰ JP 5-0, III-21.

communications equipment, 430 vehicles, fifty-five tons of medical supplies, and nearly 30,000 troops as casualties.⁸¹ However, the campaign also resulted in several undesired effects which impeded long-term achievement of the objective. By failing to identify the importance of the conditions of surprise and containment, MACV and JGS allowed a majority of enemy forces to withdraw deeper into Cambodia. This resulted in increased NVA support to Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in order to re-establish their lines of communication.⁸²

Current joint doctrine stresses the identification of friendly and enemy COGs as one of the most important planning tasks of the joint force commander and staff. Clausewitz described this task as keeping in mind “the dominant characteristics of both belligerents...of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.”⁸³ JP 5-0 further defines the concept as “a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.”⁸⁴ COGs, according to joint doctrine, are directly linked to the objective. Given the limited military objective of the Cambodian Campaign under the strategy of Vietnamization, MACV identified its enemy operational COG as NVA conventional forces.⁸⁵ A critical capability (crucial enabler for a COG) necessary for those conventional combat forces were their operational support units. Further, the critical requirement (essential resource for critical capability) and critical vulnerability (aspect of critical requirement vulnerable to attack that will create significant effects) inherent for these support units were cross-border

⁸¹ Shaw, 161-162

⁸² Thomas C. Thayer, *Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War 1965-1972, Vol. 1, The Situation in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Analysis and Evaluation), Asia Division, 1975), 181.

⁸³ Clausewitz, 595-596.

⁸⁴ JP 5-0, III-22.

⁸⁵ Foreign Relations of the United States, 903. Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Vietnam Bunker (for Abrams) to President Nixon, Saigon, April 27, 1970.

sanctuaries.⁸⁶ However, because the US strategy of Vietnamization sought to extricate itself while handing over the war to RVNAF, the enemy operational COG identified by MACV was not necessarily the same for JGS and South Vietnam, which was fighting a hybrid insurgent and conventional threat. The South Vietnamese population remained the operational COG for both the South and North Vietnamese throughout the conflict because the support of the people was critical to both sides' military strategy. The difference between MACV and JGS operational COGs helps explain two phenomena in the conflict. First, it explains why the United States changed its initial role in the campaign from combat support of RVNAF to a more direct role in targeting specific key enemy base areas. Specifically, the United States could not risk the possibility of an RVNAF failure to sufficiently disrupt NVA sustainment operations, which would have resulted in a continued threat to US forces during their withdrawal. Second, it explains why RVNAF planned operations within the campaign to address South Vietnamese refugee evacuation and security.

Operational artists influence the enemy's COG and the outcome of operations by identifying and acting on decisive points. A decisive point, described in JP 5-0, is "a geographic place, specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows a commander to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contributes materially to achieving success."⁸⁷ Joint doctrine further emphasizes the relationship of decisive points to COGs, stating "Although decisive points are usually not COGs, they are the keys to attacking or protecting them."⁸⁸ From MACV's perspective, the enemy operational COG's critical requirement and vulnerability were cross-border sanctuaries. With this in mind, MACV defined the decisive points for the Cambodian Campaign mostly in terms of enemy base areas. When developing plans for potential

⁸⁶ ADRP 1-02, 1-16.

⁸⁷ JP 5-0, III-26.

⁸⁸ Ibid., III-26.

operations against enemy base areas, Abrams considered Base Areas 352/353 to be the highest in priority because it would result in the maximum unsettling effect on the enemy, both militarily and psychologically.⁸⁹ Base Areas 352/353 were considered such a lucrative target because MACV assessed them to contain the COSVN headquarters. To decrease risk of potential failure in destroying the COSVN headquarters, Abrams and policymakers decided to make Operation Toan Thang 43 one of the earliest operations and have US forces primacy over the mission with minimal RVNAF participation. But despite the massive enemy footprint found in Toan Thang 43, the COSVN headquarters, which had moved westward weeks earlier, remained largely intact and functional. While MACV failed to achieve its highest priority decisive point of the destruction of the COSVN headquarters, operations into the base areas did result in the loss of the Sihanoukville Port Route to the communists. This forced the NVA to rely entirely on the Ho Chi Minh Trail as its major line of communication, setting conditions for subsequent cross-border operations in Laos the next year.⁹⁰

Operational artists have two distinct ways in which to contend with their enemy operational COG—directly and indirectly. According to current joint doctrine, a direct approach “attacks the enemy’s COG or principal strength by applying combat power directly against it,” while an indirect approach “attacks the enemy’s COG by applying combat power against a series of decisive points that lead to the defeat of the COG while avoiding enemy strength.”⁹¹ By attacking the critical vulnerability of enemy base areas, MACV used an indirect approach in the Cambodian Campaign to defeat what it perceived as its enemy’s operational COG. The “supply, command and control, training, and rehabilitation areas of enemy forces” were critical

⁸⁹ Foreign Relations of the United States, 902. Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Vietnam Bunker (for Abrams) to President Nixon, Saigon, April 27, 1970.

⁹⁰ Willbanks, 94.

⁹¹ JP 5-0, III-31 through III-32.

requirements for NVA conventional forces, and attacking these dismantled the support infrastructure necessary to support NVA operational capabilities.⁹²

When arranging tactical actions, operational artists are limited in the range in which they can operate, which becomes a driving consideration in planning efforts. Joint doctrine defines operational reach as “the distance and duration across which a joint force can successfully employ military capabilities.”⁹³ It further describes the concept, offering that geography, weapon systems, and sustainment are key factors which often determine operational reach. In the Cambodian Campaign, however, none of these factors offered by doctrine truly defined the range beyond which forces could not operate.

The thirty kilometer limitation placed on MACV in terms of operational reach was driven by US policy and politics. Nixon and Kissinger’s policy of “peace with honor,” and the strategy of Vietnamization, were adopted because of the necessity to sustain America’s popular support of the war effort long enough to afford South Vietnam a chance at survival while inducing Hanoi to settle for peace. The domestic political support to the Nixon administration would not tolerate what could be perceived as a massive, regional expansion of the conflict. Nixon’s public announcement of troop withdrawals were his means of ensuring popular support for his policy,⁹⁴ and Nixon could not risk the withdrawals being affected by deep operations in Cambodia. Nixon had to build support for the campaign both within his own political coalition and across the domestic population, but in doing so had to place specific restrictions on the incursion. That is why, in a 24 April telephone conversation with Senator Stennis, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and later in his public address to the nation announcing the campaign, Nixon promised, “We are not going to get involved in a war in Cambodia. We are not going to occupy

⁹² Foreign Relations of the United States, 893. Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, Washington, DC, April 27, 1970.

⁹³ JP 5-0, III-31 through III-33.

⁹⁴ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 681.

Cambodia.”⁹⁵ Operational restrictions were not only placed on distances within the campaign, but also on duration.

Throughout the operations process, operational artists forecast the expenditure of resources and means of military actions over time, which allows them to generate additional resources required to achieve objectives before reaching the point of culmination. *Joint Operation Planning* describes culmination as “that point in time and/or space at which the operation can no longer maintain momentum.”⁹⁶ In major combat operations, this point is defined by current doctrine in terms of the inability of the force to transition from the offense to the defense and vice versa. However, in limited warfare, as current doctrine accounts, operational culmination can result from erosion of domestic political support.⁹⁷ Just as the distance of the Cambodian Campaign was restricted by political risk to the administration, so too was MACV constrained in the duration of the campaign due to the requirement to sustain enough domestic political support for Nixon’s policy. While the rainy season in Southeast Asia was a major consideration for the timing of the campaign, neither the weather nor the potential to generate sufficient resources and means for continued operations dictated culmination for Abrams. Domestic political support was the finite resource which affected the momentum of the campaign. Sen. Stennis, when advising Kissinger and Nixon of the domestic political situation before the campaign, recommended limiting the duration and scope of the missions, stating he “could see the utility of a raid of several weeks’ duration that included American ground forces, as long as it sped up the end of the war in South Vietnam.”⁹⁸ Despite operational success in the campaign, MACV worked under a

⁹⁵ Foreign Relations of the United States, 876. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon, his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), and the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee (Stennis), Washington, DC, April 24, 1970.

⁹⁶ JP 5-0, III-31 through III-34.

⁹⁷ JP 5-0, III-31 through III-34.

⁹⁸ Foreign Relations of the United States, 876. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon, his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), and the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee (Stennis), Washington, DC, April 24, 1970.

01 July deadline to withdraw US troops from Cambodia, a deadline assured by Nixon to Congress at the beginning of operations.⁹⁹

A final element to discuss in an evaluation of the current doctrine of operational art through the Cambodian Campaign involves the concept of forces and functions. Joint doctrine describes this element of operational design as how operational artists “focus on defeating either adversary forces, functions, or a combination of both.”¹⁰⁰ While this concept can be helpful in terms of describing an emergent operational approach and also avoids a false dichotomy by offering a blended option, it differs little from the concept of direct and indirect approach. In the Cambodian Campaign, US forces and RVNAF incorporated an indirect approach which focused mainly on their adversary’s functional ability to provide operational support to its main conventional forces. What is missing from the concept of forces and functions in current doctrine is the discussion of how different friendly forces can best be organized and employed in accordance with their competencies and organizational/national interests. During the initial planning of the operation, MACV was directed to minimize US involvement in the campaign.¹⁰¹ However, when asked to consider two different options for ground attacks on enemy base areas, the first requiring substantial US involvement and the second reducing the necessity of US involvement, Abrams recommended the first option. His justification for this decision was that US-led operations increased the chance for success.¹⁰² This decision on the employment of forces provided advantages in terms of the military end state condition of bringing the combat situation under control to allow continued US troop withdrawal. However, this decision simultaneously

⁹⁹ Foreign Relations of the United States, 951. Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Cambodia, Washington, DC, May 9, 1970.

¹⁰⁰ JP 5-0, III-31 through III-38.

¹⁰¹ William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 139.

¹⁰² Foreign Relations of the United States, 899. Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, DC, April 27, 1970.

undermined the military end state condition of shifting responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese.

The Cambodian Campaign shows that the tools used to develop operational approaches should differ depending on the nature of war being waged. MACV's operational approach focused efforts against what it perceived as its enemy COG—conventional NVA forces—rather than the achievement of all of the strategic objectives. To better focus operations in limited warfare, operational artists must focus operational design on those elements which most closely relate to political conditions.

Conclusion

Analysis of the 1970 Cambodian Campaign results in several deductions which help military scholars and practitioners understand the current US military doctrine of operational art. By looking at all three levels of war- strategic, tactical, and operational- three important lessons emerge regarding ends, means, and ways linked by operational artists in wars of limited aims. These points are not solely relevant to that campaign of the past, but are also informative regarding the future. In future wars, operational artists could benefit from the lessons discovered to better translate military operations into political results.

First, ends can change over time, which requires the operational artist to reframe the operational approach. At the tactical level of war, characterized by battles and engagements, military planners produce mission orders. These mission orders are essentially a theory of victory outlining the arrangement of tactical actions which will produce military defeat of an opponent military force. However, at the operational level of war, characterized by campaigns and major operations, operational artists develop an operational approach. An operational approach, unlike a mission order, is a theory of termination outlining the military conditions necessary to end a conflict on favorable terms. With this distinction in mind, operational art should not be misconstrued as the pursuit of military victory. In fact, operational art occurs even when policy and strategy do not seek military victory as a decision criteria to terminate conflict. In wars of limited aim policies and strategies change over time. The discourse between adversaries through violence on the battlefield along with the discourse between policymakers and populations through international and domestic politics create changes in the environment. Over time, these environmental changes alter the termination criteria deemed to be achievable, thus forcing an evolution to the policy and strategy.¹⁰³ Unable to provide decisive outcomes which alter the will of the adversary's government, military, and people, military forces operating under a policy and

¹⁰³ Lauer, 122.

strategy which once sought military victory can find themselves later seeking much more limited objectives.

In the case of the Cambodian Campaign, previous discourse with the enemy and amongst the American people and their leaders resulted in a policy and strategy in which US forces did not seek the achievement of military victory in Vietnam; rather, they sought the avoidance of an immediate military defeat. The campaign was an operational success in that it provided spoiling attacks necessary to disrupt a large-scale NVA conventional attack until 1972. This allowed for the continued withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, one of Nixon's goals for the campaign. In this respect, the campaign solidly contributed to the limited objectives inherent to "peace with honor" and Vietnamization.

Second, the Cambodian Campaign shows that restricting means (resources) affects the translation of tactical actions into enduring advantages. In limited war, where policy and strategy objectives may not seek military victory, but rather the avoidance of defeat, operational artists likely have fewer resources and are more restricted in the use of those resources. This means that operational artists in limited wars are more challenged in organizing forces and arranging tactical actions which ensure lasting effects. Policymakers, in order to mitigate political risks inherent in the execution of their policy, place restrictions on operational artists.¹⁰⁴

In the Cambodian Campaign, Abrams and MACV were restricted in both time (duration) and space (distance), which directly impacted the culmination, operational reach, and force and functions elements of operational design. Under these restrictions, operations provided only limited and temporary advantages, which did little to alter the will of the communists or influence them to negotiate for peace. In this respect, the campaign was of minimal contribution to policy and strategy objectives.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 121.

The final lesson of the campaign analysis is that the tools used to develop operational approaches should differ depending on the type of war being waged. The Cambodian Campaign shows that operational artists, particularly in limited wars, should not focus operations solely on defeating an adversary force (COG), but rather should seek achievement of strategic objectives.¹⁰⁵ Unlimited wars, undertaken by regimes which face an existential threat, often result in military strategies seeking decisive battle or annihilation of enemy forces. For the operational artist in unlimited wars, these opposing military forces are likely identified as the enemy COGs, which then become the focus of campaigns and major operations. In unlimited wars, operational artists are less constrained by policymakers in the use of force because the relatively high level of enmity in the domestic population supports a policy which requires large-scale application of lethal force. Limited wars, however, are usually undertaken by regimes which face less than existential threats. Because there is less inherent risk posed to the domestic population, the level of enmity within the population is relatively low and is less tolerant of policies which require large-scale violence. This results in military strategies which, instead of victory, seek to avoid defeat. But in seeking to avoid defeat, many of the elements of operational design become less instructive to the operational artist. It not only becomes more challenging for the operational artist to identify the enemy's COGs, but also how to determine decisive points, the appropriate use of direct or indirect approach, and the focus of effort against enemy forces and/or functions. In limited wars, where the military component to policy and strategic objectives is more restricted due to a lower level of enmity in the domestic population, operational artists must focus operational design in those elements which more closely relate to political conditions-termination, military end state, objective, and effects.

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Lessard, "Campaign Design for Winning the War...and the Peace," *Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2005): 39.

In the Cambodian Campaign, MACV's operational approach focused efforts against what it perceived as its enemy COG, conventional NVA forces, rather than the achievement of all strategic objectives. This approach resulted in great losses to the identified enemy COG, which helped stabilize the combat situation and bought time for continued US troop withdrawals. However, with US forces taking such a leading role in the campaign, the approach did not focus on achieving the goal of shifting the responsibility for the war to the RVNAF, a strategic objective of Vietnamization which supported the policy goals of "peace with honor."

The significance of these findings does not rest in any conclusions about the success or contributions of the Cambodian Campaign in 1970 to the overall US effort in Vietnam, and they are not intended to tell who lost the war or why. However, by noticing a discrepancy in opinions regarding Vietnam in general, and the Cambodian Campaign in particular, one is prompted to search the past for clues which might help us explain the discord. By using the campaign as a lens, one ends up gaining a better understanding of not only what happened and why, but also how those events relate to various concepts in our modern doctrine of operational art.

The campaign gives insight into how Abrams and MACV interpreted policy objectives and developed military strategy and an operational approach in pursuit of those objectives. It also shows how the interaction of different levels of war played out through the practice of operational art. By analyzing the strategic objectives and arrangement of tactical actions within the campaign through elements of operational design, three main lessons on operational art emerged. These lessons, importantly, are not solely relevant to that campaign of the past, but are also informative regarding the future.

The complexity of current conflicts presents challenges to US forces because much of its doctrine was developed for inter-state war.¹⁰⁶ As the number and scope of intra-state and non-

¹⁰⁶ US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-5-500, *Commander's Appreciation and Campaign Design*, version 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2008), 4.

state conflicts increases, US military doctrine needs to account for nuances associated with fighting limited wars. These include the notions that the ends change over time, the operational artist must mitigate the tendency for operational restrictions to undermine enduring advantages, and that operational approaches must be developed primarily in accordance with the more political elements of operational design. In future wars, operational artists could benefit from the lessons discovered here to better translate military operations into political results.

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